

Lighting up genetic workings

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July 23, 1989

Chicago Tribune

Scientists who want to keep track of whether genes are working may have a novel new tool that literally lights up when a genetic switch is thrown.

By transplanting genes from the Jamaican click beetle, a cousin of the firefly, into bacteria, scientists from the University of California at San Diego have fixed it so they can see when genes are turned on or off.

The genes used in this procedure are the ones that produce an enzyme called luciferase, which is what makes fireflies glow. They generate lights that are green, yellow-green, yellow and orange.

"These genes are potentially very valuable as research tools for tracking gene expression — that is, letting us know when genes are turned on or off — in living systems," said Keith Wood, primary researcher on the project.